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ABSTRACT

This paper describes ethnographic research designed to discover whether the establishment of formal partnerships would ease traditional conflicts within the student teaching triad. In 1984, Brigham Young University (Utah) and five neighboring school districts entered into a formal university-school partnership. One priority was to develop teacher preparation programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of the public schools. The perceptions, trust levels, expectations, and types of communication among eight university supervisors, 18 cooperating teachers, and 26 student teachers in two junior high schools and one high school were ascertained. The results suggest that conflicts can be minimized if supervisors, cooperating teachers, and student teachers work together and keep in mind each other's self-interests. (JAM)

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A Study of Shared Self-Interests in a University-School Partnership

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
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A Study of Shared Self-Interests in a University-School Partnership

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Background

In 1984, Brigham Young University and five neighboring school districts entered into a formal University-school partnership. The promptings for creating such a partnership, and its nurturing during the first two years, were provided by John Goodlad as he repeatedly visited our campus and neighboring school districts. The emerging goal, by both parties, has been to create a genuine working relationship: symbiotic, feelings of equality, shared self interests, and non-exploitive collaboration.

One priority, forged through this emerging partnership, was to develop teacher preparation programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of the public schools. Teachers would be trained, jointly, by university faculty and practicing school teachers. This partnership training, if conducted as a genuinely collaborative effort, would necessitate a restructuring of the university's teacher education program and, to some extent, the school environments in which students were being trained.

The partnership is now five years old. In its ongoing evolution, we are interested in the extent to which collaboration in teacher training has started to take place--given the discussions, committees, workings and pledges of both parties to partner the training of teachers.. The lowest possible level for actually observing collaborative work seemed to be the student

teaching triad: the inter-relationships among the student teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor.

Literature Context

The student teaching triad existed long before the advent of formal university-school partnerships. While there have been voices calling for thoughtful collaboration among the three (e.g. Ryan, 1985), the track record is bumpy. Indeed, much of the literature attests to the lack of substantive communication, cooperative planning, and congruency in role expectations among triad members, particularly between the university supervisor and cooperating teacher. Early on, in her discussions with student teachers, Cope (1969) found that there was generally lacking "a recognition of a triangular working partnership" involving student, tertiary supervisor and cooperating teacher. A review by Griffin, Hughes, & Defino (1981) led them to conclude that, "Generally, the value of the university supervisor in the usual triadic model has been open to question." Tinning's work (1983) suggested that university supervisors have a low impact on student teachers, while Monson and Webb (1970) viewed the university supervisor's role as unnecessary. Zimpher, DeVoss, and Nott (1980) at least regard it as extremely complex. Turney, et al. (1982) observed that, "Within the supervisory triad various kind of complications and conflicts can occur . . . Members tend to form 'competitive diadic conditions' which can hinder student development and hamper the work of supervisors."

Research Questions

The question arises: Is there something inherent in the establishment of a formal partnership that eases traditional conflicts within the student teaching triad? We wanted to assess the perceptions, the trust levels, the

expectations, and the types of communication among the university supervisor, the cooperating teacher, and the student teacher--all nested within the partnership.

At the research level, we started out with what seemed at the time to be a decent set of questions. Each member of the triad was asked to describe his or her personal expectations, then predict those of other members of the triad. Next, questions were asked about how those expectations had been fulfilled, impeded or revised. Through comparing expectations, we would generate evidence about type of communication, levels of trust, and degree of collaboration during the student teaching experience in the partnership schools.

As we began reading our early field notes, they suggested the answers to more direct and precise questions we probably should have asked in the first place:

Do university supervisors, working in partnership schools, productively collaborate with cooperating teachers in the training of student teachers? More specifically, do they plan, together, the experiences for the student teacher? Do they coordinate with each other in diagnosing problems and making recommendations to the student teacher? Do they act and talk like they respect each other's role in the training of the student teacher? Does each support the efforts of the other when working with the student teacher? Does the student teacher feel he or she is being trained by cooperative efforts on the part of both?

Procedure

Because of the time and expense of ethnographic research, the study was limited to only three schools, two junior highs and one high school, in one of the five partnership districts. To the eighteen cooperating teachers in these three schools were assigned twenty-six student teachers. During the fifteen-week student teaching experience, many of the student teachers were rotated, spending several weeks with different cooperating teachers. Eight university faculty members were assigned as supervisors to these twenty-six student teachers. Each faculty member mentored from three to four student teachers.

A doctoral student in instructional science, trained in ethnographic techniques, gathered data through interviews, document analysis, and classroom observations. The interviews were conducted over the fifteen-week period. Three of the student teachers were interviewed twice, five of the cooperating teachers were interviewed twice, and two of the university supervisors were interviewed twice. Additionally, a teacher team leader, working with all the student teachers coming into his building, was interviewed twice, The principals of each school were interviewed, and the dean of the college of education was interviewed. Interviews averaged twenty minutes in length and were each tape recorded, expanded, and coded. This study reports only data from the interviews.

The interview notes were read and studied by two of the three authors. Each interview was analyzed for responses which addressed the research questions. From these groups of responses, a set of conclusions were generated.

Conclusions

The interview data turned out to be voluminous. Conclusions reported below represent only those obtained by slicing the data to shed light on the student teaching triad. Many other conclusions are still possible from the data.

1. Virtually all of the cooperating teachers provided a detailed procedure they followed in ushering student teachers into their particular classrooms. This procedure included how they went about training the student teacher in basic classroom management and teaching skills. In describing these procedures, cooperating teachers revealed their perceptions about the type of university training being provided the student teacher: Lots of theoretical stuff with little or no skills in the practical aspects of teaching. Indeed, both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher expected the student teacher to be "starting from scratch."

   Not so with the university supervisors. They assumed student teachers were carrying a number of teaching skills into the classroom--skills developed through the program. Their concern, at the same time, was that these skills would invariably deteriorate if not given the opportunity to be practiced--a most likely possibility.

2. In outlining their procedures for training young teachers-to-be, the cooperating teachers showed remarkable sophistication and experience. Their training techniques, born largely of personal trial and error over

the years, reflected persuasive pedagogical soundness. In addition, we were struck by the feelings of responsibility they sensed in working with student teachers. Even in midst of grumbling about the task, they were not about to allow their student teacher to fail in their classrooms. Parenthetically, the cooperating teacher's commitment to train the student teacher was often contingent upon the student teacher's willingness to follow that teacher's prescription of what constituted good teaching.

3. Neither the student teacher nor the cooperating teacher considered the university supervisor to be very credible when he or she was out in the school. And, the longer the student teacher remained in the teaching setting, the more her university supervisor's credibility waned. Mostly likely, this resulted because the student teacher 1) grew in confidence as the weeks passed by, and 2) felt supported, mentored, and rescued on a daily basis by the cooperating teacher. The bond between them grew, while their bond with the college supervisor weakened.

4. The cooperating teachers perceived most university supervisors as being quite fixed and stabilized in their views--views which they felt were mostly out of synch with modern classrooms. Supervisors had been too long out of the classroom. For example, in one case the supervisor suggested to the student teacher that she reward the class by letting them play board games (e.g. Monopoly or Clue). When instigated, the activity flopped because junior high students seem to no longer consider board games as either interesting or challenging. Sitting passively

around a board, rolling dice, can hardly compete with Star Wars or Nintendo video games.

Further, university supervisors would "sail in and out" too much. They would come in, observe for twenty to forty minutes, then often offer unrealistic suggestions to the student teacher. She was frequently asked to accomplish more than could be delivered, given the constraints of the classroom and the level at which she was progressing. The recommendations given by the university supervisor were often based on incomplete evidence gained from little more than a snapshot of the classroom. Both the cooperating teacher and student teacher, operating from within the overall context of the classroom, could see this. Even though student teachers typically reported their supervisor visits as "helpful," neither they nor the cooperating teachers felt the university supervisors were having much overall impact.

5. In the minds of at least the seasoned cooperating teachers, there were no real institutional constraints in the school which impeded their mentoring process. The only constraint, they acknowledged, was their own willingness to put in the time to train the student teacher. But most did put in the time. A large number of the student teachers were given ample freedom to plan, teach, and re-teach their own lessons. Some were allowed total freedom; others could be creative as long as they stayed within the curricular bounds established by the teacher. Preparation was the cooperating teacher's main concern. The more the student teacher prepared, the greater the licence to be creative.

At the same time, many university supervisors perceived their student teachers as being quite constrained, unable to try out this discipline approach or that critical thinking technique--that freedom to try out new things was wanting.

6. The cooperating teachers spent very little time with the university supervisors, since the latter were in the habit of dashing in, observing, then dashing out. Little interchange occurred between the two of them--only courteous pleasantries. Few interviews revealed any discussion at all about the student teacher. Often, there was but a "How well is she doing?" on the part of the university supervisor, and "We've got a problem" on the part of the cooperating teacher. This lack of serious communication--let alone collaboration--existed despite feelings on the part of both that they ought to sit down talk about the student teacher. They simply never got around to doing it.

When the supervisor visited a classroom, all his attention was given to the student teacher, at the exclusion of the cooperating teacher. Over time, this no doubt sent a message to the cooperating teacher: What you are doing with the student teacher is not important enough for us to sit down and talk about.

7. In the minds of both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher, insufficient supervision was taking place in the classroom by the university supervisor. Time was the culprit according to everyone interviewed. The university supervisor was perceived as being too strung out--too many student teachers and burdensome university

responsibilities. Still, the university supervisor seemed to be saying, "Granted, I don't have enough time to supervise like I want to. But I'm still doing a pretty good job."

8. The plan for most cooperating teachers was to place the student teacher in a highly structured environment during the first week or two, then gradually allow him to assume greater responsibility and freedom in the classroom. Almost all the student teachers appreciated this approach. University supervisors, on the other hand, often felt their students were being quickly turned loose to fend for themselves--while the cooperating teachers were either escaping, or off on other projects. In practice, this was generally not the case.

9. University supervisors usually conducted once-a-week seminars. Student teachers were brought together and asked questions like "What went well?" "What didn't work?" This generic experience, considered important by the university supervisors, probably had some discussion benefit but was not singled out as a terribly helpful activity by the student teachers themselves.

Cooperating teachers, on the other hand, were asking these same questions on an individual basis at the end of a given lesson, or at the end of the day. Student teachers reported considerable benefit from these one-on-one feedback sessions. But university supervisors seemed to have little or no knowledge about what kind or how much help student teachers were receiving during these sessions.

10. Student teachers were reluctant to unload a problem in front of both the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher. Typically, the student teacher either confided in the cooperating teacher, or the university supervisor, but not both when they were all together. This suggested to us that student teachers were not confident that genuine collaboration was taking place.

11. We obtained very little evidence that university supervisors sat down with cooperating teachers and discussed their respective evaluations of the student teacher--or even compared them. While both may have felt it important to judge independently, ratings were often quite dissimilar. For example, in one case the cooperating teacher felt the student teacher was doing a "horrible job." At the same time, the university supervisor kept praising her for "doing such a great job." Upon receiving this strikingly different feedback, the student teacher was thrown into a state of disequilibrium. In an opposite instance, a university supervisor constantly criticized a student teacher who was emulating the cooperating teacher's style. All the time she had been reinforcing the student teacher's techniques. The cooperating teacher now saw this as a direct criticism of her, since the student teacher was modeling her style. In retaliation, the cooperating teacher discounted the credibility of the university supervisor--to the student teacher.

Discussion

This study was designed to assess the workings of a university-school partnership in the training of student teachers--at a grass roots level. Most of the data point to a conclusion that, in these three sample schools, the partnership concept has not been convincingly implemented. Why, in a four-year old partnership, would this be the case in these three schools?

The easiest explanation is that the partnership is still young, and the formation of genuinely collaborative relationships requires a much longer period of time. Inexperience no doubt accounts for at least some of the lack of collaboration. But we think other, more basic factors are at work.

Though steps have been taken to promulgate ownership at all levels, the partnership has, nonetheless, been very much a top down phenomenon. The dean of the college and the five superintendents constitute the governing board. Many faculty, principals, and teachers have given lip service--and even emotional allegiance--to the partnership. But operationally, it moves very slowly.

But having studied the evolution of the partnership, and based on our data from this study, there appears to be a more telling explanation. It seems perfectly possible to partnership at one level without altering one's traditional perceptions. A faculty member may talk about the importance of working together with the cooperating teacher--on a truly collegial basis--and even want to do it, but still fundamentally believe that his solo method of supervision is best. His perception of the importance of his role in periodically visiting a student teacher may remain comfortably fixed and unexamined. He may say to himself, "I've been doing this for a long time and

I am basically helpful to student teachers. While I'd be willing to enter a more formal partnership with the cooperating teacher, I still know what I know and I will continue doing it the way I think is best for me."

On the other side, the cooperating teacher, also willing to work cooperatively with the university supervisor, may fundamentally believe that her method of ushering student teachers into teaching is the best. She may continue to perceive her role as being infinitely more important than the university supervisor's in the training process--even while sitting at the table planning with him! She may say to herself, "I've been working with student teachers for years--and also with college supervisors. They simply don't have the savvy when it comes to what goes on in a classroom, even when they think they do. They're just not equipped to come in here."

This phenomenon is simply portrayed by the person who says, "Its hard to soar with the eagles when you're working with turkeys." If both supervisor and cooperating teacher continue to perceive each other in traditional ways, each will simply go through the motions of collaborative effort.

Reforming perceptions is no easy task. But in two other schools in the partnership, genuine collaboration has taken place. What is the difference between those schools and these in our study? In those schools both parties have been working closely together since the partnership originated. Changes in perceptions appear to have come as a natural by-product of shoulder-to shoulder work. Time and proximity have been important ingredients.

To be sure, time and proximity may be generative, but still insufficient. Within the triad, cooperating teachers must assertively give input about student teaching issues that deeply concern them. The university supervisor must heed these concerns--indeed, seek them out. To do so requires

time on his part. Hence the college of education will be ultimately obliged to restructure its supervision philosophy--to accommodate a deeper and more thorough training for each student teacher. This may necessitate, among other things, a reduction in the number of students being trained and, perhaps most importantly, a redefinition of the college supervisor's role.

"Symbiosis" is a powerful metaphor. It suggests two partners, coming from different backgrounds and interests, working together while keeping in mind each other's self interests. Bringing this metaphor into the constant awareness of grass-roots people is our continuing challenge.

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